

February Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

February in Southern California means starting a new garden. La Niña seems to be making it clear and warm, almost Spring before its time. Although frosts are possible, they're not probable, since the average last frost date for us is January 28. If nothing else, check out mailorder catalogs and garden store seed racks and plants to help you decide what to grow this year. And, since it hasn't rained a lot lately, spend your time outdoors digging in lots of compost and manure so plant roots will love their new home and produce lots for your visual and gustatory pleasure!

Successful gardens result from both planning ahead and paying attention throughout the growing season until harvest. The amount of time and effort you know you'll be able to give to your garden this year should determine how extensive it will be.

It's very hard to resist planting a lot, especially when the seeds are so small and the tiny plants are so cute. After a long, dreary winter, all of us are eager to overplant, only to be swamped with tomatoes and overwhelmed with zucchini. Limit yourself to the amount of space and number of plants you'll be able to take care of well when they're mature. Then you'll be pleased with your successes rather than disappointed with your attempts.

Also, try something new, if just for novelty. You'll automatically include the veggies and posies you know your family will enjoy, but adding something new will give you a new adventure. Who knows--you might even discover a new favorite.

Some varieties are widely adaptable to various growing areas--like the All America selections--but others are not. Purchase those that are known to do well in your immediate area. Even then, a particular vegetable or flower variety may produce well for you but not for a friend a few miles away or across town, and vice versa.

Gardening can be either frustratingly uncertain or an exciting challenge. Each gardener gardens differently, according to his or her own needs and desires. Soils differ in proportions of sand, silt, clay, and organic matter. Weather seems to never be consistent from year to year. There's always something new on the market to try as the perfect vegetable or flower or tool or technique. The great fun is in discovering and making the perfect garden happen. The great payoffs are in eating the delicious veggies, admiring the beautiful blooms, smelling the wonderful fragrances, and marveling at the plentiful harvest from those few tiny seeds and plants.

Vegetables and Fruits

Sow beets, caraway, celery, carrots, chard, chervil, chives, collards, cilantro (coriander), dill, endive, fennel, garlic, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuces, mustards, green onions, bulb onion sets, flat-leafed parsley, peas, white potatoes, radishes, shallots, spinaches, and turnips. Indoors, start eggplants, peppers, and tomatoes as a promise to yourself that warm times are truly coming.



Tender, sweet broccoli is dependable from late Fall through early summer. Hot weather makes it more spicy-tasting. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000

Place potatoes in a four-inch-deep trench dug well with compost, and cover the cut-and-calloused pieces or small whole tubers with more compost to the original soil level. Water lightly, just to settle the soil close to the seed pieces. Too much will rot them.

When choosing carrot varieties, consider the heaviness of your soil--sow short stubby carrots in heavy clay soils, and longer tapered ones in looser sandy soil. Tips of the tap roots will grow four to six inches further down than the edible portion.

Distributing small seeds evenly when sowing can be tricky. A lead pencil provides two approaches. For smaller seeds, moisten the lead-end, stick it into the seed to pick up one or two, and move them to the

rooting medium. For slightly larger seeds, use the wet eraser-end. A length of wet string also helps for thick sowing--dip it into the seeds and place it on the rooting medium, string and all. The seeds will sprout around the seed, and it will rot away.

Damping off of seedlings can be cured by watering several times with chamomile tea. Steep one tablespoon of dried chamomile in six cups of boiling water. Cool to lukewarm or cool before using.

Transplant artichoke and asparagus crowns and rhubarb rhizomes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, horseradish, kale, leeks, lettuce, onions, peas, and spinach. If the soil is still waterlogged, gently dig the hole, position the plant, and gently gather the soil around the plant's roots. Water just enough to resettle the soil around the roots. This will result in the least compaction of the soil.

One technique to assure sturdy tomato plants from seeds started indoors uses quart-size plastic food storage bags. Folding the bags into square boxes allows several bags to fit together as a group in a square drip tray. Also, each plant's root system is concentrated in blocks that are easy to transplant into the garden. To prepare each bag, fold the bottom two corners under to meet, point to point, and tape them in place. Clip the four new corners for drainage.

Transplant each two-inch tall seedling into its own bag. Fold down the top of each bag to just above the soil level of the plant. Pack each together in the drip tray, and place the tray in a bright but cool area. As the plants grow, add more soil every few days up to the growing tip, pulling up the sides of the bag as necessary. Water and feed as usual. Turn the whole tray every day or so so that the plants grow straight. The resulting transplants often have half-inch thick stems.

For deep planting into the garden, cut open the bottom of the bag, and set the plant and its entire root system into a hole deep enough to bury the plant up to its top set of leaves. Slip the bag up and out of the hole over the plant. Fill in the hole with soil.

For horizontal planting, also cut open the bottom of the bag, but turn the plant on its side and gently urge it out so it's laying down in a three- inch-deep trench long enough to accommodate the root section and half of the plant stem. Gently bend the plant's growing tip up above the soil surface, and fill in the hole around the plant and up to these top leaves.

Water in the plant with a half-strength solution of a balanced complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10. "Balanced" means all the N-P-K numbers are the same. "Complete" means that there is at least some of each N, P, and K; none of the numbers is a zero, such as 0-10-10.

In both planting techniques, roots will form along the length of the buried stem. The deep-planting method is generally chosen by gardeners in areas with warm springs and summers and those who have loose soils in raised beds. The horizontal planting method is more useful for gardens with cooler springs and summers and soils that are heavy.

This is the last month to plant bareroot fruit and nut trees, berries, grapes, and vines. It's the best time to plant strawberries, so they can grow well before the weather warms and they put out blossoms.

Feed established deciduous fruit trees about three weeks before you expect them to bloom.

To prevent sunburn damage--which invites borers and other critters--paint exposed trunks and large limbs with off-white matte interior latex paint mixed half and half with water.

Apply the last dormant spray before mid-month. The precise timing of this application is critical--before the buds swell is too early, and after the blossoms open is too late. The ideal time is when the buds are swollen but don't yet show color. Once the buds open, the damage has already been done.

To lessen brown rot, follow up this spraying with another when three-fourths of the petals have fallen.

Ornamentals

Sow ageratums, alyssum, asters, baby-blue-eyes, baby's breath, bachelor's buttons (cornflower), calendulas, campanulas (canterbury bells), candytuft, carnations, clarkias (godetia), coreopsis, columbines, coralbells, cosmos, African daisies (gazania) and Shasta daisies, delphiniums, dianthus, forget-me-nots, foxgloves, hollyhocks, impatiens, larkspur, linaria, lobelia, lunaria (honesty, money plant, silver dollar plant), lupines, marigolds, morning glories, nasturtiums, nemesia, pansies, petunias, phlox, California and Shirley poppies, salvia, scabiosa (pincushion flower), snapdragons, stocks, strawflowers (helichrysum), sweet peas, sweet williams, verbena, violas, and wildflowers.



Edible nasturtiums' bright blooms and lush leaves add peppery delight to salads year-round.

*Photo by Yvonne Savio,
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Transplant these (except California poppies and wildflowers) and azaleas, bleeding hearts, camellias, cinerarias, chrysanthemums, coreopsis, dusty miller, euryops, Australian fuchsias, gardenias, gaillardias, geraniums, gerberas, helleborus (Christmas or Easter rose), Iceland poppies, lavender, lupines, peonies, primroses, rhododendrons, bareroot roses, rudbekias (gloriosa daisy, coneflower, black-eyed susan), verbenas, violets and deciduous shade trees.

Plant bulbs for spring and early summer blooms--including achimenes, agapanthus, amaryllis, tuberous begonias, caladiums, calla lilies, canna lilies, colchicums, dahlias, daffodils, daylilies, gladiolus, bearded and Dutch iris, sternbergias, tigridias, and tuberoses. For continuous spring bloom later this spring, plant a selection of anemones, gladiolus, ranunculus, and tigridias every two weeks through March.

Amaryllis that's just finished blooming can be grown as an evergreen, indoors or out, through the fall, and encouraged to bloom again next winter. The bloomed-out stalk can be cut off about an inch above where it emerges from the bulb or allowed to dry up naturally--this allows the plant to reabsorb the energy and store it for the next bloom. Set the plant in a warm, sunny place, water generously, and fertilize regularly through August. Then, let the plant rest a bit, with no fertilizer and only enough moisture to keep the soil barely moist. Be sure to not let the plant dry out at any time, however, or the growth cycle will be upset and perhaps skip or delay the next round of bloom. In September, move the plant to a spot that's sunny but where daytime temperatures are in the 70's and nighttime temperatures are above 55. Begin watering and fertilizing--with a high phosphorus and high-potash food (the last two numbers of the N-P-K trio)--and watch for buds. You may even have two or three separate bloom stalks.

Gently prune fuchsias to shape them before they break into leaf. However, hold off on heavy pruning until after they've completely leafed out later this spring, to be certain you're not clipping off more than was damaged by frost.

For indoor bouquets, cut a few branches of almond, cherry, crabapple, deutzia, forsythia, honeysuckle, peach, pear, plum, pussywillow, quince, redbud, spiraea, weigela, and other spring-blooming deciduous shrubs and trees. Force blooms on these branches by crushing the ends of the stems and placing them in warm (70-80 degree) water in a cool, humid area with moderate light for a week before moving them indoors to bloom. Delay major pruning of these and other spring-blooming shrubs until after they finish blooming, or you'll remove the flower buds that set last fall.

Lilac's first bloom and honeysuckle's first red berries are cues to potential grasshopper populations. If immature grasshoppers are present in the garden at this time, you have two or three weeks to control them before they grow into destructive adults that will lay eggs for bigger and bigger populations throughout the spring and summer.

Feed groundcovers, shrubs, roses, perennials, and trees with slow-release food (compost, bone meal, cottonseed meal, blood meal, or well-rotted manure) to provide plants with consistent and gradual nutrition throughout the season.

Keep lawns mowed. Slow growth doesn't mean mowing isn't needed. The grass will go into shock if more than 25 percent of its new growth is mowed at one time. Keep mower blades sharp--raggedly-cut grass blades die back and invite diseases.

General

Finish heavy pruning of dormant trees, shrubs that will bloom in summer and fall, roses, grapes, and berries this month, preferably before they've budded out.

If frost threatens, it'll be more likely on a cold, clear night. Continue to keep plants watered for better frost damage resistance. Also water hanging pots and plantings under eaves. Cold weather can be very drying to plants, especially if the wind blows.

Give your hands a moisturizing treatment as you garden by lavishly spreading them with hand lotion or cream before putting on your gloves. Add extra cream under your fingernails. As you work, your hands will absorb the cream. When you remove the gloves, your hands will have benefited from the cream rather than suffered from the moisture-removing soil. In addition, the soil will be more easily washed from under your fingernails because the cream or lotion formed a barrier.

Make your wheelbarrow support its own loads by adding wheels to the rear legs. Anchor two small wheels at the ends of a bar that reaches between the legs and is anchored with a U-bolt, crosspiece, washer, and nut on both the outside and inside of each wheel. The smaller the wheels, the less the rear end of the wheelbarrow is raised. This balances the wheelbarrow without your help, and allows you to push it rather than lift and push. This makes loads much easier to move with less effort and strain.

Mark frequently-used measurements on your hoe handle with permanent marking pen to help you space plants or rows uniformly with just one tool.

Leave thick-soled rubber or wood backless shoes such as clogs outside the door to the garden for quick and easy use. They'll keep feet well above the moist (and squishy) soil. With pathways that are well-mulched, they won't require continuous cleaning, either. With only the addition of heavy socks in cold weather, they'll serve year 'round.

Use a lightweight plastic garbage can to haul around the yard when weeding or pruning. As the can fills, empty it into central disposal cans, and continue collecting. If you push the container around in your wheelbarrow, you won't strain yourself struggling with a heavy container, so your energy can go into further gardening.

Pull weeds now, when they're small and before they form flowers or seeds, and you'll have fewer weed problems later. Watering the area to be weeded the day before the job will soften the soil and ease the removal of the weed's entire root system, preventing resprouting. A handy tool to use to pry up entire root systems is the pronged "asparagus fork" that looks like a bent stick. If you pull out a weed that has already formed its seedhead, do not leave it in a walkway as mulch or compost it, unless you know your compost pile gets hot enough to destroy the seeds.



Nectarine blossoms assure Spring's arrival.
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